

Sculpture Garden 211/74 Recalls City's Past

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

Behind the Brooklyn Museum is a garden, simply landscaped and familiar to the hundreds of people who weekly pass through it to enter. Less known is the fact that the garden is also the most notable repository for the city's discarded architectural heritage.

It is, in a sense, a graveyard for that heritage and yet it is gradually becoming the city's most vital living landmark. It holds enough historic treasures so that anyone could relive the glories of this city's past in a day's visit.

There are nine lions from Coney Island's Steeplechase Park, clock figures and columns from the old Penn Station, elaborate iron railings from the Police Gazette Building, Satyr heads and lyres from the ceiling of the Metropolitan Opera House.

Fox, Steer Heads
There's even a fox head keystone from a hunting store dating from the age when they still rode to hounds in Brooklyn, and there's a copper longhorn steer head from a leather-binding store that once flourished at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge.

But perhaps most interesting of all are the fragments of anonymous art carved by the large number of immigrant stone carvers who did so much to create the diversity of urban architecture. They date from the decades of richly embellished buildings when less wasn't more and when people held the peculiar notion that making even pedestrian buildings artistically attractive would make them more rentable.

The collection has been gradually growing since 1906 when the garden was first offered as a storage-display area to art dealer Teas Karp. Karp is probably best known as the discoverer of such pop artists as Warhol, Lichtenstein and Rosenquist. Yet, in the mid-50s, as he witnessed the rapid demolition of city buildings, he founded the Anonymous Arts Recovery Society, a handful of energetic people who would spend weekends rescuing carvings from falling structures.

Left 'Unprotected'
For years, Karp says, the museum arrangement was a disappointment. "The museum staff never showed any passionate conviction for it as an archeological repository," he says, "and most of it was left unprotected and no serious conservation attempt was made."

The collection which has grown from about 300 to over 1000 pieces remained the museum's stepchild until September, 1972, when Barbara Milstein, a city history buff who cares deeply about preservation, took the unpaid position of museum architect and research associate.

Her assignment was merely to catalogue the garden collection, but she has done more. She pressured museum officials to build protective structures for the most delicate pieces. She asked for and got funds from an enthusiastic Knooling Foundation—a loyal group of collectors and museum friends. She researched, documented and arranges the display and the collection is fast becoming a model for cities around the country.

Daily Mrs. Milstein is out badgering demolition foremen and building owners to donate pieces before they are whisked away by eager antique dealers. "I'm bound and determined to save this collection," she states flatly, "and I don't care how I do it."

1800-1918 Emphasis
Karp's original emphasis was on works dating from 1850 to 1910 which, he says, was the height of "original surface embellishment" and when artisans developed very personal and inventive styles. Faces were often portraits of the Carver's friends—warts, missing teeth and Chewie buns bore the faces of his children. And design was "intentional" the result of his own whim.

"They reflected the immigrant waves that came here beginning with the end of the 18th century," he says. Scotch, German and English. Then the Irish and then the Italians and Jews. The Jews came from Russia where being a carver was one of the careers allowed by the czar. A lot of their work is on the Upper West Side where lions of Judah and stars of David are carved on brownstone facades.

Black carvers from the South, she adds, also left their imprint. Much of the detail on Riverside Row, the landmark blocks at 128th and 130th Sts. between Seventh and Eighth Aves., is thought to be done by black carvers and, Mrs. Milstein has discovered, much of the ornamentation in the Willis Av. area of the South Bronx is thought to have been executed by black artisans.

"These carvings," she explains, pointing to a few samples, "are more realistic than most and many blacks are depicted on brownstone stoops and keystones."

Structural Elements
Many of the garden's objects, Mrs. Milstein says, were structural elements—like keystones supporting doorways, column capitals or stoop railings. Though functional, they were also decorative. With the advent of modern architecture—primarily in the 1920s and 1930s—with its simplified exteriors and emphasis on the "clean line," hand-wrought decoration was cast aside.

Ironically, Mrs. Milstein notes, the continuing accumulation of such artistic fragments depends on the continuing destruction of the buildings they embellished.

Garden of Surprises



Elaborate railing from the old Police Gazette building is one of the notable architectural remnants from demolished buildings that fill the Brooklyn Museum sculpture garden. The garden curator, Barbara Milstein (below) points to stone carvings removed from demolished buildings in the Willis Av. area of the Bronx. This selection include Teddy Roosevelt (lower right), Wild Bill Hickok (above TH) and Buffalo Bill (bottom center). Story on Page 50.

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